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COLONIAL CHURCHES IN
THE ORIGINAL COLONY OF
VIRGINIA; A SERIES OF
SKETCHES BY ESPECIALLY
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THE COLONIAL CHURCHES OF YORK COUNTY, VIRGINIA

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THE small county of York held within its narrow bounds the nucleus of early Colonial life and strength. Very near the first seat of government at Jamestown and afterwards halving with James City county, the new business home of Governor and Burgesses, it numbered among the planters those who influenced the destinies of all the other counties.

There were three distinct Church parishes within its bounds. Charles Parish at New Poquoson, on Poquoson river, was in the lower part of the county and was called New Poquoson, in contradistinction to Old Poquoson or Elizabeth City. It was ordered by the House of Burgesses, Dec. 11, 1692, that "upon the petition of ye pishioners of New Poquoson in ye county of Yorke yt from henceforth forever hereafter ye old pish Church shall be called and named Charles Church. And ye river formerly called New Poquoson river shall from time to time and all times hereafter be called and written, Charles river." The parish became known as Charles Parish, but the river is Poquoson river. This parish as New Poquoson had already existed over forty years.

In the north of the county were the other two parishes, Kiskiyache, settled in 1630, Yorke in 1632. In 1633 the seventh of the stores for receiving and shipping purposes ordered to be built in the different plantations were built on Charles river for the inhabitants of Kiskiyache and Yorke. Kiskiyache was made a parish in 1642, and when Charles river county was changed in name to York, the name of Kiskiyache was changed to Hampton Parish.

The first rector of Yorke and Hampton parishes was Rev. Anthony Panton, in 1639-40. He became involved in an undignified squabble with Richard Kempe, secretary of the Colony, whom he spoke of as a "jackanapes" and criticized the untidiness of his personal appearance. Richard Kempe took his revenge by having him deprived of his charge. Anthony Panton appealed to England, bringing serious charges against Kempe of mismanagement in public affairs. Kempe was recalled and the charges against Panton were ordered to be inquired into, and

if innocent of them he was to be reinstated in his parishes of Yorke and Hampton, which latter is described as being between Williamshurg and Yorke. (Neill's Virginia Carolorum.)

"Parson Cluverius was rector of Yorke-Hampton in 1644." (Virginia Historical Magazine.) Bishop Meade states that an old tombstone in Yorke county reads, "Rev. Thomas Hampton, rector of Yorke in 1647."

In 1642 a contract was made to build a church in Yorke. (Yorke Records.) The so-called "Temple Farm" was the site of old Yorke church and there is a deed recorded in Yorktown about 1769 which calls the field in which the so-called temple stood, "The Church Field." What is pointed out as a temple ruin is old Yorke church, described in early patents. (William and Mary Quarterly.)

The old Yorke church was abandoned when Yorktown was established, and before 1700 a new church was built there. "To this once busy emporium of trade, the courthouse and church were transferred—the courthouse from the half-way house on the road to Martin's Hundred, and the church from the old forgotten plantations of Martin Baker and George Menifee. . . . Near the half way house kept by the Hansfords are the ruins of old Hampton church, formerly Chislack church. When Yorke and Hampton united into Yorke-Hampton the Communion service belonged to Hampton." (William and Mary Quarterly, Vol. I-II.)

From the different accounts given in the two Historical Magazines in Virginia, taken directly from Yorke county records and from the old register, all of which can easily be verified, it appears that up to 1642 the parishes of Yorke county were perfectly distinct; only Yorke and Hampton were often under the same minister. Judging by the old register, which begins long before 1692, when the name was changed from New Poquoson to Charles Parish, this parish was large and flourishing, containing many well known names.

The first entry concerning a rector was in 1687: "Ye Rev. Thomas Finney, rector of this parish, died and was buried in the chancel of New Poquoson Church." The next clergyman came in 1688, Rev. James Scinter. He died in 1723, after a quiet ministry of 35 years, leading us to hope, from the length of his pastorate, that he was one of the few inducted ministers.

It was during the very short interregnum after his death that Charles Parish was reported to the Bishop of London as vacant. The next rector was called from Old Poquoson or Elizabeth City; Rev. James Falconer, who died in 1727. Rev. Theodosius Staige was then called

from Fredericksburg. He died after a pastorate of 20 years, in 1747. In 1749 the Rev. Thomas Warrington is mentioned as rector. In 1756 he was called to Old Poquoson. The last name given was Rev. Joseph Davenport, who was still rector when the register closed. The very last entry was by Rev. Samuel Shields in 1789, who would seem to have combined Charles and Yorke-Hampton parishes under the same charge. Thus we see that in 140 years Charles Parish had only had six ministers.

In our review of Yorke-Hampton up to 1647 it had already had three clergymen. Throughout its history it is marked by constant change among its clergy. Probably on account of its nearness to the restless Church element in Williamshurg it would be apt to be influenced more or less by the disputes between the Governor and the vestries, and later between the Governor and the Commissary.

Old Yorke church was, according to early patents and records, at Temple Farm or "the Old Church Field," two or three miles from Yorktown. The foundations still existing measure 60 feet east and west, 46 feet north and south. Hampton church stood in Kiskyache, or Chislack, between Williamshurg and Yorktown. "Col. Edward Digges owned a plantation in Hampton Parish, of 1,250 acres, near the Indian town of Kiskyache." (William and Mary Quarterly.) After some time the parish was united to that of York and called York-Hampton. The family seat of the Digges was eight miles from Williamshurg and was called "Belfield."

Rev. William White was rector of York in 1658, Rev. James Folliott in 1680, Rev. Stephen Fouace came from England in 1688, returned and died there in 1702. He was rector of York-Hampton and witnessed a written promise from Governor Nicholson to give the sum of £20 towards the building of a church in Yorktown if built within two years, to be built of brick. This was in 1696. Documentary proof like this ought to settle the date of the building of the present church. In 1695 Governor Nicholson gave 3½ acres of land in Yorktown for a free school. In 1860 Yorktown was laid out on land belonging to Mr. Benjamin Reade, inherited from Captain Nicholas Martineau, who was Burgess for Kiskyache. The courthouse was ordered built in 1691 and all county business was moved there. The next clergyman we know of was Rev. Mr. Goodwin, 1714.

Then comes a break in our information until 1724, when the Rev. Francis Fontaine makes a report to the Bishop of London, in which he speaks of his parish thus: "There are two churches in this parish

(York-Hampton), one in Yorktown and the other eight miles distant. My parish is twenty miles in length and four miles broad. There are two hundred families in it. In my church at Yorktown there are three score communicants, at the other church about twenty."

It certainly seems as if the weight of evidence puts Hampton church in the twelve miles more or less between Williamsburg and Yorktown, rather than in the lower part of the county, where it would conflict very decidedly with the large and well-cared for Charles Parish. Bishop Meade himself takes this view. He says (Vol. I., p. 197): "There was at an early period a small parish between Williamsburg and Yorktown called Kliskyache or Chesecake. The church which still stands a few miles from Williamsburg on the road to York belonged to that parish." The Bishop also says that the *Virginia Gazette* for March, 1746, says that the plate given the church by Nathaniel Bacon had been stolen. (This was not the Nathaniel Bacon of notorious memory, but a near kinsman.) This was the plate of York-Hampton church; perhaps that is the reason that in 1748 Philip Lightfoot in his will leaves £50 to buy a 'silver flaggon and chalice,' to be engraved with his arms, for York-Hampton Church." Be that as it may the old Communion service of Hampton Parish has been transferred to Yorktown, where it is still in use. It is engraved "Hampton Parish in Yorke County, Virginia." The hall-mark shows it was made in 1649. The service has one flaggon 10¼ inches high and one cup 8½ inches. The plate is modern, not solid silver.

The present church of Yorktown, probably the same one to which Governor Nicholson subscribed in 1636, stands upon an elevation about 50 feet above the river and about 250 or 300 feet from the water. It is built of a sort of marl stone taken from the hills overlooking the river. When it was burnt in 1815 the action of the fire made the stone still firmer, so that it was easily rebuilt. The old church was in the shape of a T situated east and west. When it was rebuilt the wings of the T were left off, making only a nave 60 by 30 feet. The foundations of the wings have been filled up with rubbish and are distinctly visible, the walls being 2½ feet thick.

In 1758 the Rev. John Camm was rector of York-Hampton. He brought the parish into prominence by the strong stand he took with regard to the payment of the clergy in money; the paper currency which was good only in the Colony, allowing the small sum of only two pence a pound for the tobacco, which had formerly been the medium of pay between the vestry and the minister, thus depriving the

clergy of the benefit of any fluctuation in the price of that commodity. Mr. Camm not only resented this for himself, but he determined to fight it out for his brother clergy, making his the test case. He fought it first before the home government, then carried it to England. He gained his point there, the Royal Commission ordering the annulment of the law; but there was such bitter feeling against the royal decision that when the case came up before the Virginia Assembly he was awarded one penny damages. The second time it was referred to England, and the King and his officers refused to interfere again.

Twice in the history of the Church in Virginia did vital interests depend upon individual action. The two Nelsons, the president and secretary, refused to sit upon the board because they belonged to Mr. Camm's parish and were opposed to the measure, thus leaving a majority of one for instead of against it. If they had consented to serve it would have been a majority of one against it and probably it would have dropped.

When the question of taking away the glebe lands came up years later Judge Pendleton had written his decision against the legality of the act, carrying with him the weighing vote. Dying suddenly, he had not signed the paper, and his successor rendering an adverse decision, the great injustice was an accomplished fact.

In 1785, when the Convention was held in Richmond, Yorktown church was represented by Rev. Robert Andrews, and Charles Parish by Rev. Joseph Davenport. The church in Yorktown had seen sad days, alternately in the hands of British and Continental troops and many of its best men in the service of their country in other parts of the Colony, it had been almost defenceless. In 1781 "The windows and pews having been broken and destroyed and the Church used as a magazine, the damages were valued at £150. The destruction was wrought by Lord Cornwallis." (York Co. Records.) Cornwallis surrendered and the Articles of Capitulation were signed at Temple Farm.

In 1786 and for many years Rev. Samuel Shields represented both Charles Parish and York-Hampton at the Conventions. In 1793 Rev. James Henderson represented them. From 1799 to 1815 all parish reports were irregular and Charles and York-Hampton are absent from the printed Convention reports. The church in Yorktown had probably not been rebuilt after it was burnt in 1815, because Bishop Moore visited Yorktown in 1825 and preached in the morning at the courthouse and in the afternoon at Mr. Nelson's house.

In 1825 the Rev. Mark Chevers, rector of Elizabeth City, reports: "At the request of a few families in Charles Parish, York county, I have for some months performed divine services and preached from house to house every fortnight on Saturdays, and it gives me great satisfaction to state to the Convention that the services have been well attended and a vestry has recently been chosen and exertions are making. The hope is entertained that the love of the Church may yet revive in the parish. Communicants 32; baptisms 40; marriages 5; funerals 9." It is evident from these last two items that the whole of York county was without a useable church building.

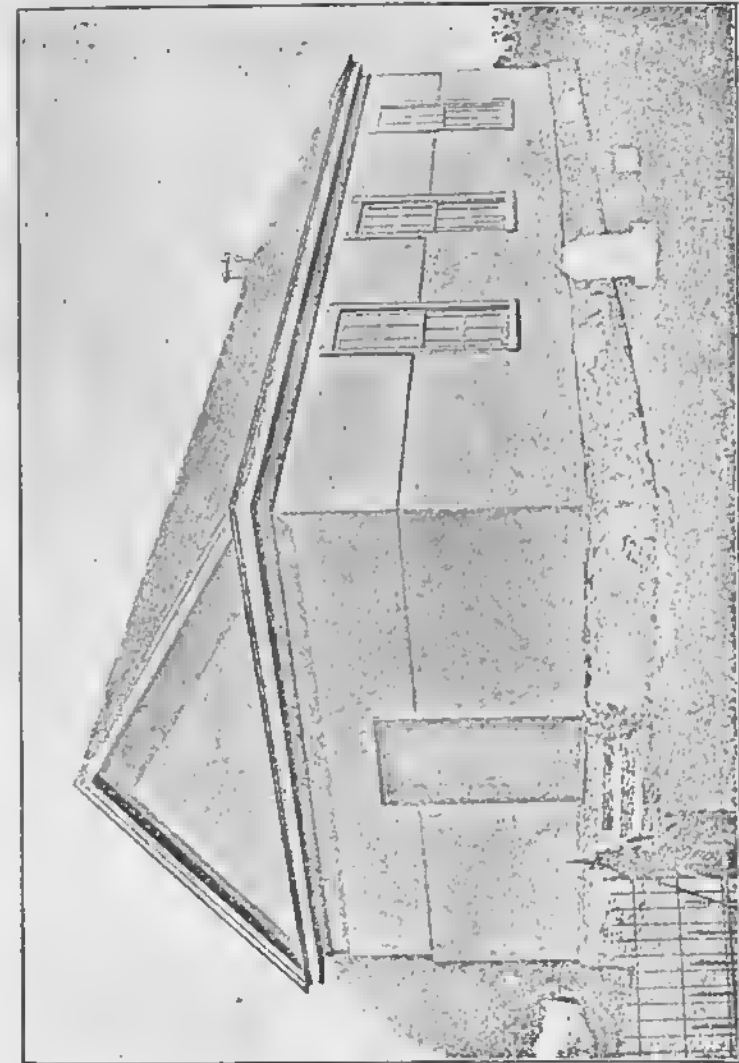
A careful perusal of the Convention reports edited by Dr. Hawks shows a greater desire in the two Bishops, Moore and Meade, to start missions and churches in the new counties constantly forming than to revive the old churches on the coast.

Tradition says that the bell was given by Queen Anne. When the church was burnt the bell was broken and the fragments were laid aside in the vestry room. After the Civil War those pieces were found in Philadelphia by Rev. Mr. Nicholson, afterwards Bishop Nicholson, and being attracted by the words "Yorktown, Virginia, 1725," he wrote to Rev. Mr. Bryan asking the history of the bell. It was then recast by the Hook Smelting Company in 1882, and on July 11, 1889, was rung on a rude scaffold in the churchyard, and rung for service after a silence of 75 years.

The church suffered again during the Civil War. Standing as it did on the brow of a hill commanding the wide sweep of water, it was an important point of view; and a signal tower was erected on top of it. The brick wall was taken away and the church dismantled. It is hoped that damages will be obtained for this military destruction also.

After the war the late Dr. Wharton was very much interested in the restoration of the church and worked hard to keep the building from falling into the hands of some other denomination which would gladly have paid for repairing it for the sake of possessing a historical church.

The ministers who have served there since 1835, probably in connection with some other charge, are: Dr. Minnigerode, Rev. Thomas Ambler, Dr. L. B. Wharton, Rev. A. Y. Hundley, Rev. F. M. Burch, Rev. William B. Lee, 1877-99. Rev. Floyd Kurtz, 1899-1901. In 1901 Rev. William B. Lee resumed charge of the parish, in connection with the churches in Gloucester county, Hampton church and that of Charles Parish have disappeared from the face of the earth; and the



Grace Church, Yorktown, Va.

long roll of their communicants is called now in the heavenly courts. Grace church alone in its dual character of York-Hampton, stands as it has stood for two hundred and seven years.

This article has already outrun its limits, so apace falls in which to go over the list of prominent families who once filled these three churches. Three generations of Nelsons lie in the graveyard there, who by their strong individuality and sterling character impressed themselves on the early history of Church and State. The evidence of the strong Christian spirit of these ancestors of the Nelson family can be seen in the number of faithful clergy who have borne the name in the last fifty years.

In either the first or second volume of the William and Mary Quarterly is a list of the estates and families in the county of York during the years of its prosperity, which makes you feel as if you were riding past plantation after plantation; and some of the names are so closely connected with the stirring history of the Colony, that you feel as if you personally knew the owners of those well kept places. No doubt there are many items of interest that could be added to this article, but the main purpose in writing it was to connect the early history of these three parishes with the imperfect sketch of Bishop Meade in 1854. That has been accomplished, and also pretty strong proof has been adduced to show that York-Hampton was really the name of the church at Yorktown itself—a hyphenated name for the united church of old Yorke and Hampton.

For Reference

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M. C. O.

Colonial Churches of
York Co., Va.